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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000031

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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE SECRETARY OF STATE TALKS ABOUT CUBA

REF: A. VATICAN 22 B. VATICAN 29

VATICAN 00000031 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Chris Sandrolini, DCM.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Cardinal Bertone told the Ambassador that Raul Castro is a practical man, and asked the US to consider dropping sanctions against Cuba to encourage change at this crucial political time on the island. The Ambassador underlined the need for the Cuban government to free political prisoners, respect human rights, and hold free elections. Bertone hoped that parallel or sequential steps on the part of the US and Cuba would lower mutual antagonism. Bertone's secretary criticized the Cuban government for not allowing the construction of new churches, and noted the failure of the Cuban authorities to provide basic services. The Holy See wants freedom for Catholics and for the Catholic Church as an institution. The Holy See shares the USG's goal of bringing freedom and human rights to Cuba. End summary

¶2. (C) Immediately after presenting her credentials to the Pope on February 29, the Ambassador met with the Holy See Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone. During the twenty minute conversation, the Cardinal spoke about his February 20 to 26 trip to Cuba. Concurrently, in a separate conversation, Monsignor Nicolas Thevenin, Cardinal Bertone's personal secretary, shared with poloffs some additional observations on

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Cuba.

Raul, a practical man

¶3. (C) Cardinal Bertone, who was the first foreign dignitary to meet Raul Castro after his becoming president, stated that, in his view, Raul is "a practical man open to practical steps" to address Cuba's problems. Bertone suggested the US lift economic sanctions (which the Holy See refers to as an embargo) as a means to foster change in Cuba. Bertone agreed that the Cuban government should improve human rights. The Ambassador stated that the Cuban regime should free political prisoners to show its commitment to change. Bertone responded that lifting the sanctions and releasing political prisoners could take place in parallel or perhaps sequentially, as a means to reduce US-Cuba antagonism and create an environment conducive to change in Cuba at this "crucial time".

Socio-economic conditions in Cuba

¶4. (C) While the Ambassador was meeting Bertone, poloffs waited in a contiguous room with Bertone's personal secretary, Monsignor Nicolas Thevenin, and with the Holy See's Chief of

Protocol, Monsignor Fortunatus Nwachukwu. Thevenin, who had accompanied Bertone on his trip to Cuba and had previously served in the Holy See's Nunciature in Havana, commented that economic conditions in Cuba were very poor. It was difficult to get some basic foodstuffs, like milk and vegetables, and even public healthcare was failing. He commented that the Cuban government's program to send doctors overseas to serve in less developed countries is a mechanism to raise revenues: host countries pay Cuban embassies a set fee to support the doctors' expenses, from which the embassies keep a huge percentage.

15. (C) Thevenin stated he was able to see some of his old friends and contacts during the visit. From them he learned that it was not until the very last moment that the Cuban government stopped impeding the completion of the monument commemorating the 1998 historical visit of Pope John Paul II. Reportedly, some Cuban officials wanted to do away with the monument's plaque, which reads "Open the doors to Christ". Thevenin also commented on the selection of an old-guard representative as Raul's vice-president. Some considered this appointment a symbolic rather than a real concession to hardliners, while others thought that it showed the old guard's resilience and continued influence. "Time will tell," he added.

Religious freedom and human rights

16. (C) Despite the attempts of his colleague (apparently concerned that the conversation had become a bit too candid) to change the subject, Thevenin continued to offer observations about the Catholic Church and Cuba. There were many more Catholics now. New churches were needed. However, the government has not authorized the construction of any new church buildings, forcing Cubans to pray and celebrate the sacraments in private homes. Thevenin thought the government of Cuba was "making a big deal" out of the fact that it had made available a building for the seminary in Havana, noting that the Church had originally owned the property but the government was now charging rent. Asked if the GOC had made any promises to the Holy See on religious freedom or other issues, Thevenin said that "intentions" were declared.

VATICAN 00000031 002.2 OF 002

17. (U) Recalling the words of a late Cuban Archbishop, Cardinal Bertone's speech at the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Havana on February 25 noted that "the dream of the Catholic Church is that the Cuban Church be the Church and nothing more; and that civil institutions of the nation be the civil institutions of the nation and nothing more. And that the Church in Cuba may be the Church of charity, service and mission". While this may seem to present a limited-scope view of the role of the Church in Cuba, Bertone also noted that "religious freedom is not comprehensive and truthful if it does not convey a public dimension as well. Religious freedom does not belong only to the individual. It belongs also to the family, to religious groups, and to the Church itself, so that citizens have the real possibility of exercising their rights and fulfill their spiritual obligations."

18. (C) While Bertone did not discuss political prisoners with the Ambassador, the Holy See had previously told us that he would raise the issue during his meetings with Cuban authorities in Havana, including specific cases we have called to the Holy See's attention (reftel A). In a statement to the press at the Havana airport on February 24, just before leaving, Cardinal Bertone said that, "with greatest respect for the sovereignty of the country and its citizens, I expressed to Raul Castro the Church's concern for the prisoners and their families." (Note: Post will follow-up to inquire about particular cases, as appropriate and in consultation with the Department. End note.)

19. (C) Other Vatican officials that we have engaged to encourage the Holy See to be more vocal in calling attention to human rights violations in Cuba have restated the Holy See's

preference to address sensitive issues privately. For the Holy See, human rights are a legitimate issue of discussion with the Cuban government. While the Holy See will not generally disclose to third parties much about the substance of its bilateral dialogues with foreign countries, Vatican officials point out that this does not mean that human rights are not part of these dialogues (note: as reported in reftel B, we have delivered to the Holy See the points about the USG's position with respect to changes in the Cuban regime. End note.)

Comment

¶10. (C) The Holy See agrees with the US goal of a democratic Cuba where human rights are respected. It continues to disagree, however, with certain USG strategies to achieve this goal. Chief among them is economic sanctions, which the Holy See generally opposes -- for Cuba and elsewhere -- because of its reported effects on average and poor citizens in targeted countries. The Holy See's main concern with respect to Cuba is not, however, US sanctions. It is promoting comprehensive religious freedom.

¶11. (C) The Holy See's perspective on religious freedom goes beyond "giving to God what belongs to God, and to Caesar what belong to Caesar," even if, as in the case of Cuba, such an approach may serve as an entry point to religious rights. As the Holy See's foreign minister, Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, laid out in a speech in Rome on January 10, the Holy See considers religious freedom an inalienable right that has "private and public dimensions, individual and collective dimensions, and also an institutional dimension". The institutional dimension is of crucial importance in Cuba and elsewhere, and it encompasses not only the ability of the Catholic Church to regulate internal matters free of government interference, but also the right to take part, as an institution, in the social life of the community. This participation can take the form of religious and moral formation and the provision of services -- like education and health -- to the poor, among other.

¶12. (C) Post will continue to engage the Holy See on human rights and to share views on how to best promote them in Cuba and elsewhere. Cardinal Bertone's comments -- in his first meeting with the Ambassador -- underscore the Holy See's belief that Raul's ascension to power offers a real opportunity of change in Cuba, and that the USG can influence that change. Bertone is also implicitly offering the Holy See as a conduit to facilitate communication between the US and Cuban governments.

GLENDON